

Identity: Beauty, Birth, and Body in Enigma Represented by Some Modern Arab Female Writers

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The nature of being women is based on biological functions, including reproduction, therefore, they are expected and framed by the tradition and society with emphasis on beauty, and a body related with the function in child birth. These social and cultural constructed are due to the male domination standards, hence, women tend to lose individual freedom. However, there is some critical resistance towards this misplacement, although some are trapped, while others rebel towards the social and cultural standards that dictate identity. The purpose of this paper is the paradox of beauty, birth and body in relation with Arab women and qualitative research, through content analysis was applied in evaluation. This was based on the Naomi's theory, synthesized with Stuart Hall's thought of identity. The five short stories written by the modern Arab woman were explored to disclose feeling, though, and experiences on the paradox issues and the result indicates the disorientation, dispossession, displacement, and opposition encountered.

Keywords: Arab Women Writers, Beauty, Birth, Body, and Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The women in Arab have been living in the male-domination arena are labeled according to their success in giving a baby boy. Based on this paradigm, women have been positioned as the reproductive purposes in which considered to be mainly as an essential in the domestic spheres. This ultimate role has been constructed by the domination of the patriarchy that contributes more advantages to the male side. The reproductive role of the female serves as media to generate the descendant of the male side with the consequences a baby boy is mainly expected to be born. A wife who is unable give any baby boy is considered as a failure wife, moreover the childless one. Those types of wives are condemned to be not only as a failure but also as a unfortunate wives. Those issues inspire some women in Arab to express their experiences, thoughts and idea the phoneme of them related to beauty, body, and birth. Despite of the tough challenges of the Arab women writers to compose and publish their short stories, there are five short stories written by six writers are worth analyzing critically on the mentioned topics. They are 1) Ihsan Kamat's *The Spider Web*, 2) Rafiqat alTabi'a's *Man and Woman*, 3) Sufi Abdallah's *Half Woman* 4) Ramziya Abbas al Iryani's *Heir Apparent*, and 5) Daisy al Amir's *The Newcomer*. Those five translated short stories are selected and published in the anthology entitled **Arab Women Writers**. Referring to the existence of the genre of short story written by Arab women, they are relatively considered new (Cohen-Mor, Dalya:2005:3). It can be assumed that the inquiry on those short stories still rare. This circumstance challenges a deep and critical interpretation in order to comprehend their thoughts, ideas, and experiences on body, beauty, and birth. These are the main purposes of the article in which the analysis applied the descriptive qualitative research with the content analysis method.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since the Second World War as most Arab countries obtained their independence and their newly governments reformed the policies of social and economics, there has been steady



improvement in the condition of women. The free compulsory education raised the increase literacy competencies among women and prospect to new employment chances. Consequently, women participation in the public sphere increases in all areas of fields, including literature. In this domain, women evolved from the edge to the center of the literary production to enrich the Arabic literature. The most popular literary genre has been fiction, especially the story telling that has served as powerful media of self-expression, sharing-experiences, and social-cultural criticism for women. In the later development, this storytelling has been transformed into short story. However, the numbers of the female Arab women are still fewer than the male writers.

There are some reasons on the minor existence of female Arab writers among others the social background, family obligations, full-time job, and poverty. Most of the female writers come from the middle and upper class that have easy access to better education to pursue knowledge. Meanwhile, the majority lower class Arab women are still illiterate. Apart from this, the traditions on the domestic sphere responsibilities hinder Arab women to be creative in writing. The men still believe that “home, not external society, is woman’s place” (Sharuni, 2009:5), yet Arab women are allowed to work outside of the house to assist the financial needs of the family. On the other hand, women work for the family not for her self-actualization. Nevertheless, women who work in the public domain, they are occupied to their tied and fulltime employment. Poverty is another obstacle for women to become creative writers. Despite from those obstacles, the raising female Arab short story writers contribute essential development to the world, especially Arab literature which needs to be studied critically and creatively due to its isolation.

The common issues represented in the selected five short stories refer to identity, body, child-bearing and beauty. To support the comprehension on the mentioned issues the article suggested to the concept of identity stated by Stuart Hall (1996). He states that identity is not fixed, absolute and deterministic. It is constructed and flexible, thus cultural identity is a “matter of becoming as well as being. Similar to this idea, yet specifies to beauty, Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth; How images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. The beauty of a woman is determined by her external factors such as work-place, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence. Those institutions construct the identity of the woman through her beauty based on the male domination standards. In line with the idea of male domination in the Arab community Nawal El Saadawi in her book entitled *The Hidden Face of Eve* (2011) agrees that there is exploitation on women due to domestic chores. The male family farm is essential to the continuity of the male decedent. Based on this tradition, the preference to have a baby boy is priority.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Being Childless Woman

Being a childless wife is in the paradoxical stated through the conflicting of anxiety, inferiority, frustration, and depression to self-awareness and self-esteem. Ghada in “The Spider’s Web” is restless as she does not have any children so she claims to God who has the absolute power to decide for women to have a child or children. Her protests to God on the wisdom of her childlessness by questioning it, as it is reflected in the following quotation:

“Is it difficult for You, O God, to grant me a child? You give others
a dozen and nothing is hard for You, if You want it. You, then,
simply don’t want it. But why? You have wisdom in everything.
What is the wisdom in my childlessness? Perhaps your wisdom
is hidden from me, and I must search for it” (Kamal, 2009:172).

She identifies herself as a failure due to her state of childless wife who is in doubt for her husband's love. She is chased by her own hesitation that her husband will continue to love her as she "deprived him of the joy of fatherhood" (Kamal, 172). Her anxiety and hesitation lead her to frustration, instead her husband's confession and confirmation that he is not bothered any longer the fact of being childless. Her faith on being childless is associated to "A house children is more fragile than a spider's web!" (Kamal, 174). However, being childless for her is "like a robot without a soul" (Kamal, 176). Event, she prefers to ask for separation. "That was more honorable for her" (Kamal, 176). Her identity is constructed by the community that appreciates highly women with children.

Her self-confidence is regained as she realizes that having some children do not guarantee for happiness. Her cousin with three children is divorced by her husband due to disharmony in their married life caused by "her extreme stubbornness and endless badgering" (Kamal, 177). Ghada's self-acceptance to her state of being childless renders her to appreciate her husband's loyalty and understanding of her childlessness. Her self-fulfillment is not constructed by her status of being childless. She comprehends that the harmony of the married life depends on the harmonious relationship between the spouses. Mutual respect and understanding between husband and wife harmonized the married life regardless the childlessness.

The wife in "Man and Woman" consciously and persistently for being childless since she does not want the child suffers from poverty, hunger, vagabond, pollution, and death. The pessimistic tone of having a child reveals the contradiction of the traditional perspective of being childless in Arab society. She disregards her self-fulfillment by having a child who will be suffer from those sufferings. The wars in Arab might lead her to be in the dilemma. She refuses to bring children to the world as she does not dare to witness the children become the victim of the world plagued by uncertainty, poverty, and war. Having children with the plague is selfish attitude for her as she believes children deserve to have proper life for their physical, mental and spiritual welfares. No assurance on these prosperities, she determines that

"I shall not give birth to a child, when there are poor children already everywhere, in the picture, and in reality, wandering in the dessert, lost in the woods, hungry in the forest, ill in huts, orphaned and lonely on the shores of oceans and seas. I shall kill my dreams...(AlTabiah, 180).

3.2 Having children

Having children fulfill the mother's physical, mental and moral aspects. Becoming the mistress to a rich and well established business man, she relies on her beauty, slimness, and self-assurance. Apart from these physical appearances, her perfect life is completed by her son and daughter. Her self-fulfillment and social standing are justified by the existence of her son. "She lent grace and beauty to the parties given by her husband; she an excellent housekeeper, a model mother, and an obedient wife, devoted to her food husband" (Abdallah, 182). Despite these perfections, her successful husband rarely besides her. Consequently, her loneliness brings into the verge of disloyalty by falling in love with other man. Torn in inner conflicts between her love and children, she sacrifices her individual freedom as she is chased by her own guilty feeling to almost leave her two children for her desire. The obligation as a mother calls her to remain with her children, instead of running away with the other man. She rejects to betray her husband and children because "she would be remains of a woman. Any woman who lost her heart, nerves, and feelings was nothing but remains! A body without a soul, a creature crawling but lifeless" (Abdallah, 184). However, it

reveals that the children function as her spiritual control on her immoral deeds in “Half Woman”.

The beauty, pain body, and health of a wife of a six daughters are neglected to prioritize the expectation of a baby boy. “Heir Apparent” represents the consequences of having baby boy whose delivery takes his mother’s life. The six daughters are not completed yet before a baby boy. Childbearing provides the mother not only self-fulfillment but also social standing, and respect in the family, especially for a baby boy. Due to this social and traditional male domination construction, the mother of six daughters has to be the family martyr as her last baby is a boy and yet cause pains and sufferings as it is depicted in the following quotations:

She could no longer suppress her screams. The labor pain got closer and closer together, and her body convulsed from the excruciating contractions, which felt like they were splitting her body in two. She screamed in pain.

“Congratulations. It’s a boy, and.....”(Al-Iryani,186)

Ironically, the long expected happiness for a baby boy ends with the death of the mother that causes repent to the husband as he has to look after six daughters and a new born baby boy. The high risk of delivering baby boy as the seventh pregnancy is paid with the bereavement of the mother who is assumed as the only person taking care of the seven children.

“The New Comer” written by Daisy al Amir represents the burden of having a new baby who only brings encumbrance to the eldest daughter as the breadwinner of the big family. The male siblings who are believed by tradition to the breadwinners could not fulfill their obligations due to their participants in wars that cause them in handicapped and death. The replacement of the duties as breadwinner to the female member of the family is not for self-actualization but as burden. The body and beauty of the last daughter serves to ensure to have male breadwinner and baby boy through marriage. On the contrary, this makes the eldest daughter suffers more by the exploitation as she compares herself to an exploited animal as it is quoted in the following quotations:

Exploited animals get daily fodder from their masters whereas she.....she was exploited and still had to provide the daily fodder for herself and others! They would need even more fodder, if what she read in her mother’s eyes meant another baby (al Amir,190)

Poverty and big family to the eldest daughter causes paradoxical circumstances that put her in the conflicting choices. The marriage of her youngest sister is expected to lessen the economic burden of the big family by having expected breadwinner from the youngest sister’s husband. On other hand, the expectancy turns to failure as the male has to be in politics not as a breadwinner of the family. The tradition puts man to play his role in the public sphere, especially in the war. With this situation, the eldest daughter again to support not only for herself, but also the parents and siblings, even the baby of her youngest sister. The eldest daughter is trapped by the tradition on child bearing, poverty, and power that leads her to disregard her individual freedom on her beauty. Her body is identified for survival based on the exploitation of her being.

4. CONCLUSION

Childbearing is conflicting issues on personal and public matters. Women are entrapped by their own decisions. Being childless is judged to be a failure as infertile women. They are responsible for the existence of the next generations, the sex of the child as they are

to be blamed for the absence of baby boy. The childless state leads to psychological and spiritual pressures. Anxiety, frustration, even depression are experienced by the childless woman, as well as her spiritual protest to God for giving her to be in the state of childless. Nevertheless, being childless does not ensure the happiness of the couple. For some women, being childless is released from the guilty feeling for making children suffer from poverty, disease, and war. Women have the right to refuse to bear a child or children in order the child or children are avoided from the psychological, social, environmental problems. In other words, women have their rights to identify themselves to be childless or the opposite. The decision for this matter is enigma as they do not have the individual freedom for it, the tradition and society still dominantly influence those women.

Their beauty, body and her ability to give birth relate to their identity that is constructed by the society and tradition opposing to their own individual freedom. Having child or children, especially to a baby boy by tradition gives the identity of perfect woman, wife, or mother. The body and beauty are any longer to be the first consideration compare to having a baby boy. Yet, the beauty and body are needed to be victimized to obtain a baby boy childbearing. Not only body and beauty that are sacrificed, but even the life of the mother. Childbearing does not also guarantee for happiness on self-fulfillment and social admission on women's fertility, instead it becomes economic and psychological burdens for the lowerclass women. Regarding social class, the middleclass women do not experience the burden to be the breadwinner. Her body and beauty attract the wealthy business man to be possessed her as symbol of success and prestige so she identifies herself as the beautiful, attractive, establishes mistress. The challenge is not on the economic needs but on the morality of being faithful wife and mother since her economics and physical necessities are fulfilled. The lack of attention and admission from the husband almost causes her trapped by love affair. Her inner call to be integrated wife is reminded by her motherly obligations to care and educated them rather than fulfill her love.

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